

ALAN JONES

THE VENICE CONVERSATIONS

WITH

GASPARE MANOS



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AJ: Zagreb has its own chic. Ladies still wear hats.

GM: It's a left over of Mitteleuropa. Naphthaline... I associate Zagreb and places like Trieste, as well as Brussels, with the smell of naphthalene.

AJ: A smell reminiscent of Giorgio de Chirico's novel *Hebdomeros*.

GM: *Hebdomeros* was a rebirth of the semicolon; the unifying ink link between a long string of ideas, situations, experiences, memories – very apt whilst talking about my vagabond life and my artistic endeavour..

AJ: So in the end, do you consider yourself Dalmatian or Venetian?

GM: I'm sure I don't know. First speaking Thai, then in Kenya speaking Italian at home and Swahili outdoors, going to an English prep school... a big mix-up in my mind. I tried asking the man at the German Consulate in Melbourne, but the stores were closed, the man had left... you know what I mean..!

AJ: There is a book about linguistical exile, one thinks of Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, Samuel Beckett, Ezra Pound and their respective literary expression.

GM: Moving around gives people like us advantages. One is constantly zapping from one reality to another, a sort of suspension state. Painting is a meta-language. You always have an ability to step back and look at your work and think about it from a different perspective. If you haven't seen a painting or heard a dialect for six months, it has changed. It appears different. You speak of exile my friend. It is a prisoner's drug! Distance is needed to focus as one loses eyesight... looking at things from a different angle... Our self-translator bedside companion Samuel Beckett has shown us that Irish is much sexier in French...

Exile of any sort forces us to focus on the roots of what makes us who we are. It enabled Beckett to coin the wonderful word *merdific*. I think it could be used to describe the contemporary art world! Certainly describes my life at various tune changes.

AJ: Translation has always been fundamental for writers, whether it's Catullus or Christopher Marlowe or T. S. Eliot.

GM: Catullus was much admired by Horace and Virgil, both of whom we should invite to dinner in our next life for a chat. Oh Catullus, I rather like his erotic and invective polymetra and epigrams. Lesbia must have cried and Cicero must have laughed on reading them. No need for translation, they are very clear and direct!

Painting is also like translation. A writer translates from one tongue to the other. A painter does the same. My painterly translations transcribe different places and experiences into one work of art at the time. Such works are a result of dislocated experiences, layers. Once metabolized, these will eventually end up as a canvas, or a sculpture or something else, even a risotto – for cooking is an art form as well, I believe.

As for method, I rarely translate to paint without drawing. Painting is a form of archeology of the mind. A clear ontology and epistemology is needed. The pencil helps. From my own philosophical chosen stance, it's all about phenomenology, in other words, giving importance and listening to past experiences of places, spaces, and language. The layers of the artist's mental map, the sediments of accumulated visions, experiences, odors all help shape and explain new works of art, in the same way a skeleton shapes a body.

You mention Marlowe! UHMMM.. His blank verses and unrhymed iambic pentameters killed off most other forms of writing. It probably resulted in his mysterious early death.. who knows! I suppose he was the Andy Warhol of Elizabethan literature - forever losing paradise for those who followed...

...and you also mention T.S.Eliot. He could have been an extraordinary artist of our own time. His flow of consciousness and monologue of interior anguish permeates much of what the critics label Art today. His writing is the equivalent of someone throwing eggs on a Caspar Friedrich painting... adieux romantics, bonjour the disillusioned frustrations of modernity. I do like T.S.Eliot !

AJ: In America we have Arshile Gorky, the Armenian genius who just showed up one day in the art world of New York as if out of nowhere. He loved demonstrating Armenian dances. Then we have his friend Willem de Kooning, from Rotterdam. Dutch humor in American English. I wonder what language all those Spaniards, Gris, Picasso, Mirò, spoke when they got together in Paris. They too underwent displacement, a geographical translation. It has something to do with idiomatic expressions, because in learning a foreign language you must learn a new way of organizing the world linguistically. Grasping this totally new set of idioms is maybe more important than acquiring vocabulary. Italian idioms are no help in Spanish.

GM: Having learned my first language in Thailand has enormously affected my work. Thai is a language based totally on sounds. The same word can mean different things depending on how you pronounce it, the way you put the accent, the intonation, how you prolong the word. That first linguistic experience has increased my love and interest in music. Hence, the link between music and art is obvious in many of my works. Furthermore, I hear sounds when I look at some colors. This has affected the way I paint. There is a musicality in the way I try to manage forms, spaces.

Many paintings I've done have some sort of relationship with music, therefore language. In Paris my exhibition at the Boulakia Gallery in 2009 was called *Rhapsodie Urbaine*. The 2008 *Urbis* exhibition at the Museo Diocesano in Venice had a series of drawings on Erik Satie and Ravel music scores...

Looking at the greater picture, my whole body of work is an attempt to distill a language of lines, colors and signs that all can understand irrespective of languages spoken. Art should bridge the gaps between the idioms spoken, the idioms you speak about, enabling different perceptions to communicate on a level plane for a brief moment.

AJ: Claude Debussy versus Claude Monet. The whole idea of a tone poem in music.

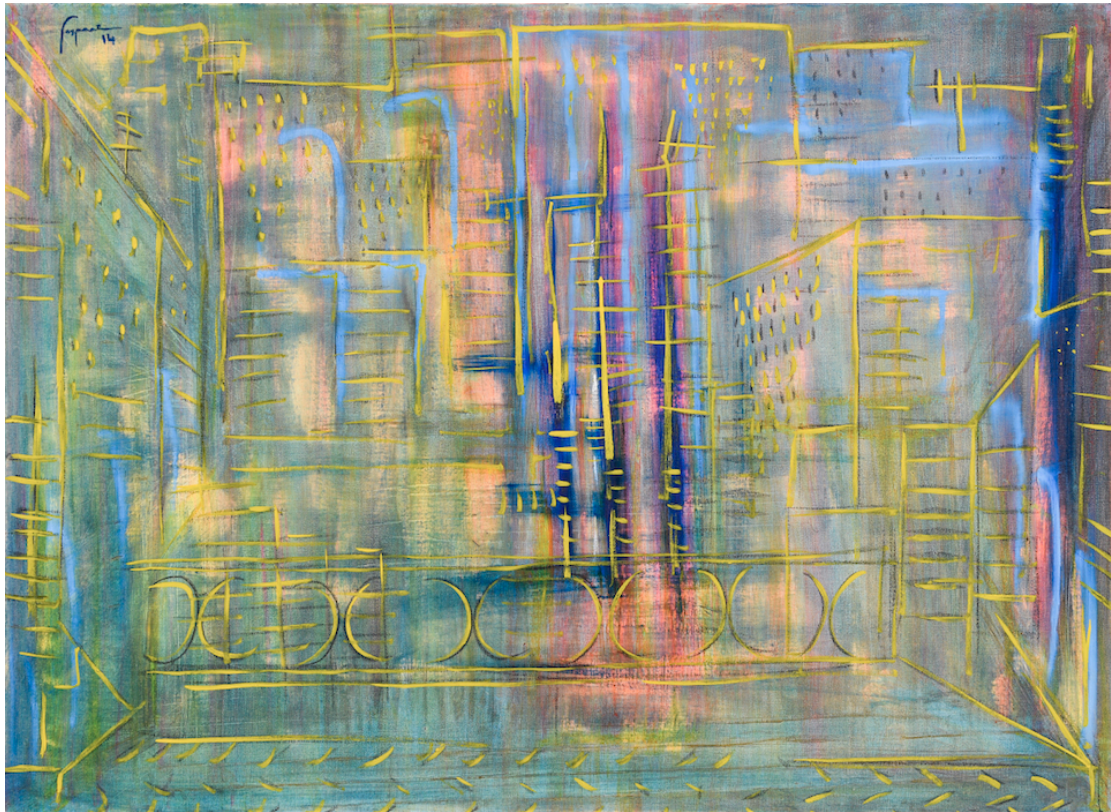
GM: Interesting you mention tone poems. This is because I often listen to Liszt whilst painting. His symphonic poems are immensely complex to grasp at a micro level... you need to zoom out to understand it. Similarly, it is the overall body of work that will reveal the nature of my art. I believe my artistic output will continue to be a continued process of experimentation and fine tuning in a very clear direction revealed only at destination. Its very coherent in my own mind in any case, like a tone poem. That is all that matters to me.

AJ: You've spoken about smells as a trigger of memory. What about humidities? What of the humidities of Thailand, or of Kenya? The humidity of Henri Matisse is different from that of Georges Braque.

GM: The place where a painting is produced affects the outcome of it. Coming back to Venice after a life of travelling the world like a nomad was equivalent to going back to the uterus.

The hospital I was born in, and our first house in Thailand, were both surrounded by water and canals, as is our family home in Venice. Bangkok and Venice had much in common from that angle. My painting is often vertical and liquid, with transparencies one finds in water. Look at the Venice lagoon, or any humid canal, or building near water. You will understand the impact of such surfaces on my way of expressing how I feel about spaces and places, the texture of my paintings. The 2006 *Rialto Bridge* painting in the Sulzberger family collection is a good example.

The reflections, the liquidity...time washing away the colors of buildings: there you have it. It's perhaps a metaphor for my own life. Maybe that's why I often remove paint once applied instead of adding more layers of paint. I remove to be able to paint. I scratch, wash away, reduce the key elements to a bare backbone so as to reveal an emotional color alphabet – color at its phenomenological level so to speak.



G. MANOS : *Yellow New York Balcony* [2014] - huile sur toile - 79 x 106 cm

AJ: We were talking yesterday about Markus Lüpertz.

GM: I like the work of Markus Lüpertz very much. I was recently introduced to his work by my collectors and friends in Munich, Franciscus S. and Monika R. who own my *art of war self-portrait Painting*, as well as many other works. I enjoyed seeing the paintings of Lüpertz in New York... at the Michael Werner Gallery I believe. Nice Gallery. Markus is an extravagant personality. I like that.

AJ: He has a *pesantezza* all his own, a center of gravity. It's something about cuisine, the difference between, say, Raoul Dufy and Georges Braque or even more extreme, Raoul Dufy and Rouault. On the one hand this deceptive airy lightness and on the other this dark gothic gloom. Or another today untalked-about painter, Maurice Vlaminck. I love his Belgian browns and greens, like Simenon.

The only contemporary painter who has ever talked to me about Dufy is the masterful New York painter Paul Russotto. He loves Dufy. Cocteau in *Le Coq et l'Arlequin* of 1923 warns us: 'Don't judge the depth by the surface, because clear waters maybe more profound than they seem.' The English poet Walter Savage Landor said the same thing a hundred years before. So he's talking about this idea of *lightness* that goes back to Tiepolo, to the Roman painting at Pompei, the resilience of lightness.

GM: I am very interested in the concept of the resilience of lightness. It enables me to mix into paint the liquid transparent oriental flavors of my childhood in Thailand with the harder, darker forces of Africa where I grew up and the

angular nature of European capitals where I work. All this is rolled up into every painting I produce.

Two things come to mind. First: have you ever seen an elephant walk? They make no sound whatsoever. They weigh tons but seem to walk on air. You will not hear an elephant until it's almost next to you. I spent a lot of time watching them in Kenya.

Second is Mohammed Ali's thinking: *Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee*. That's what I try to do in painting: a lot of time to prepare mentally, then the execution will be like shooting a gun, in other words, a doubt-free fast execution. Unfortunately, sometimes this drags on and a painting takes months, sometimes years for me to feel it is finished and free to go its way...

AJ: Your memory-bank contains a vast stock of dislocations.

GM: Coping with dislocations requires self-control, clarity, precision and economy of language dear to Ezra Pound. Such an approach gets you out of jail when trapped by a blank canvas.

I draw from those dislocations a great wealth of... I wouldn't say *inspiration*, that is the wrong word, but instead a sort of *strength* that lets me piece things together through paint. Let me give an example. You may have a vase at home that you take for granted, ignored. One day someone chips it. It then becomes precious, and all you can see is that little chip. My life has many of these chips. I'm constantly trying to piece together my life, amalgamating together different cultures, languages, ways of thinking into one single work... a single container, one painting at the time.

AJ: Walt Whitman was a typographer, the composer Charles Yves and the poet Wallace Stevens were businessmen, Carlos Williams was a doctor, T.S. Eliot the head of a great publishing firm, and Blaise Cendrars was a beekeeper...

GM: ...and Henri Rousseau was a douanier, the Maasai I met were all gentlemen poets, and Blaise Cendrars's bees came to nest in my head long ago when I stopped thinking about business and focused solely on my art.

AJ: Let's talk more about your economic thesis and painting. If you could meet Joseph Beuys today he would immediately ask you for the relation between your study of economics and your art.

GM: The Ph.D I undertook at the LSE was some sort of shamanistic archeological act. A search to understand the present by looking at the bones of the past to explain to myself what and how to paint. That led to the phenomenological approach in my art.

My academic research was about trying to understand how the past influences the present and trying to come to grips with those elements that explain continuity across time. Hence I translated this into a language that stands between figurative and abstract representation of my inner world, as well as the visible world I experience. Tracing a line between these two worlds, I remove as much as possible, leaving some elements of the past that I can call facts for lack

of other words. These provide those mental, hence visual, highways that structure a work of art. This enables me to describe a place, a space, an emotion. Everything else is color, based on imagination, based on what I have metabolized inside. Art is only about love in the end. Being in love with something that inspires me to paint and wanting to translate it for others to feel.

Joseph Beuys distilled this process. He turned it into a very personal means of artistic expression. He grounded his work in concepts of humanism, social philosophy and anthroposophy. This led to a newly stretched definition of art as a social sculpture: a gesamtkunstwerk.

AJ: You are adding an increment of...

GM: Painting is like an irresistible, uncontrollable orgasmic act: like pulling off your glove and slapping someone on the face, something Cyrano de Bergerac would do. It's the same thing that happens with love: you start loving and feel a need to possess the canvas... it's a very physical sensual act that of painting... its liquid, it glides, it liberates and one feels an endorfin uplift when the canvas is finished, almost like a coitus. I find I moan when painting sometimes on large surfaces ! It is another form of love making. It generates a painting instead of a baby.

AJ: ...spontaneously combusted value.

GM: In London I felt I was in a straight jacket. It is difficult to combine that kind of corporate rat race world with the spiritual freedom needed to paint and sculpt creatively. I had to get out. I combusted in London! It was sudden.

I remember as a student walking home late at night from a party under the pouring rain with a ten pound note in the pocket – the money for the next few days. I saw in the mist a yellow light coming towards me with the sign "Taxi". My arm simply went up by itself without thinking much for the implications. The same happened when I decided to paint instead of going to work one morning. I just raised my arm and hailed in a new life with no transition period. The second it happened I became what I am today. Its very simple, any one can do it, if they are willing to lose everything to get to their goal. But it has to be an existential need, one that will make you a better person able to contribute more towards your soul, your children, the society you live in... otherwise it will not work.

Key decisions that change lives are often spontaneous combustions.

AJ: The idea of value, of human value, measured in monetary terms, and why people do not understand exactly what money is. Ezra Pound thought long and hard about this fundamental issue. Maybe too hard. At the same time Marcel Duchamp brought into question the whole idea of art and value. What is the coin of the realm after all, and what did the work of art in the Republic of Venice really represent? Certainly not merely a quotation from Sothebys. Something else between *Fede, Giustizia, Spirito, Vita Umana...* What is the role of faith?

GM: You often told me how your friend Andy Warhol, use to go to church in New York. The spiritual is to be found in the strangest of places, but definitely has a place in the world of artists. I do the same when I can. Sometimes in the Campo Santo Stefano church in Venice, I sit there to think for hours. It is a starting point,

an anchor. I think we have a soul trapped in a body and unless we have an image that is pushed back towards us, it is difficult to understand ourselves, our life, the things we do. Art cannot evolve without some sort of faith in something, a value system in the mind of artists.

The value you ask me about is dependent on perception.. the ancient Greeks considered that human effort of the *homo faber* trying to create something with an instrument led to an instant devaluation of the idea intrinsic in the creative act itself.

On the contrary, art critics today have eliminated the *homo faber* act in the process of creating art. Instead, they want to underline the creative thinking process as the key to deciphering a work of art.

Art is no longer, for this lot, an object or a painting, but the idea of an object and of a painting. They have re-coined the meaning of art. This has been done so as to be able to give a political tag to art. Art has become a tool to control the masses. Spin-doctors turn large exhibitions into arenas for the weak of mind. Here they find bread for the hungry souls devoid of real notions of what constitutes the difference between refinement and vulgarity.

But then one could argue that esthetics in art died long ago flushed down the famous Duchampian iconoclastic urinal of 1917 signed R.Mutt.

We live in a relativist world. I believe Kant, Hume and Hegel would take a cyanide pill on the morning just before the opening of a Basel Art Show, if they were alive and lining up to pay the entrance fee to visit the art circus. I personally enjoy it sometimes. It offers food for thought and staying at Hotel les Trois Rois is always a pleasure. One meets old friends. I like the Mohito there, and the blankets on the terrace overlooking the river...

The universal appreciation of beauty is slowly eroding away. Soon they will probably find the courage to promote a plastic numbered Teletubby sculpture to the Louvre Museum acquisitions committee to be placed under the new ceiling by Cy Twombly who must have been very tired, or possibly drunk, when he conceived that work.

But I do have faith. Time will erase idiocy. What will remain in a few centuries will deserve to be called Art with a capital A.

AJ: You live in a cave, you have no mirrors, the only thing you can do is to pick up a piece of charcoal and draw something...

Who was the first painter in the caves at Lascaux? The shaman, the cripple, the wife?

GM: Probably the shaman frustrated by the constant rant of his constantly nagging partner!

AJ: Paul Russotto thinks it might have been the funny brother who had to compensate the big brothers' talent at hunting, by doing something special for them for when they come back.

GM: The word compensation is a good one. I suppose artists compensate for the rest of humanity stuck in front of a computer screen twelve hours a day.

AJ: So you left the business world to stay in the cave... this idea of inscribing an image, is the fundamental point, Marcel Duchamp went far beyond it...

GM: The artist has chosen to remain a caveman. From inside a cave looking out he sees a clear colorful light-filled panorama. He will want to express what he sees. At first scribbling on a wall, then on a canvas, sculpture, or other support and finally back to the cave wall once he realizes he is after all, a prisoner of the artist's cave.

Others looking from outside into the cave see a dark humid hole in the wall instead of a shelter. Few decide to come in after they have spent a life outside. So they buy art instead of making it. They want to experience what the artist sees, they want to see their own life differently through art. Perhaps they all dream of being artists...

Being in the cave allows one to distill and decipher the outside world, to make sense of souvenirs, experiences, our past.

The process by which an experience or souvenir is transformed into an artwork differs from person to person. In my case, the view of a shipyard, or a dock, brings to life my paternal grandmother Elvira, or grandfather Ugo telling me about a large schooner that belonged to the family called *Nirvana*, in Dalmatia. It was taken away from them by Tito and nationalized together with all their possessions...

The genesis of a painting such as *London Docks* started with the examination of a photograph of the *Nirvana*, fantasizing about rebuilding her whilst on a train in Switzerland. This generated a drawing on an envelope I found in my pocket whilst on the train. It gave birth to a series of drawings, then a painting that took over 2 years to finish. I could never have been able to paint this work with all the intensity it contains, had I not been sitting in my cave for forty years listening to my family talk about this yacht and all the family tragedy linked to Dalmatia.

AJ: William Butler Yeats once asked a good question: "What good does the fall of a great house do to anybody?"

GM: Life is a cycle, we have to accept it to be free. There is no good or bad in the fall of great houses, its just like large waves breaking on a shore. Its much better if we look at them from a distance. Yeats was often homesick for Ireland. His poem "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" clearly reveals this. Your question opens up all sorts of questions about dislocation, the importance of social change, transition, and the importance to fight for one's vision, because, as he wrote, "*Hope and Memory have one daughter and her name is Art.*" For this cause, an artist must plough onwards and upwards without looking backwards, ever. The future is built everyday on the ruins of many great houses here and as far away as China...

AJ: The entire aesthetic of the painting by ancient Chinese scholars is incomprehensible in the West. Why does this Chinese scholar want to make these images?

GM: The image produced will depend on where the cave we spoke about is located, and what the outside world looks like.

Making art is an irresistible urge, a self-psychotherapy, a basic human urge. The way this urge is translated into an image will depend on the language we use to communicate. A concept derived from a language with Latin roots cannot translate into the same image as one derived from a language based on ideograms. We are all incomprehensible to someone. Great art transcends these barriers. Think of works of art by Zao Wou-ki or Chu The-Chun.

AJ: When a fox goes hunting after midnight and hears the nightingale, he doesn't have an aesthetic perception. He recognizes the species from the song, but is not in the least interested. He doesn't know Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, but he does know from experience that he will get more protein from a rabbit.

Language is the great hobby of mankind, its very useful... then the idea of a map. A map drawn in the sand..

GM: Language, be it written, painted or scribbled on the sand, is the froth on the ocean of human toil and experience.

We need this language to build the internal map that guides us. I believe we have an inbuilt capacity to learn. We are hard wired to learn languages. Noam Chomsky slapped us in the face with his *Syntactic Structures* and his *Logical Structure of Linguistic Theory*. You may remember how this changed how we perceive structural linguistics and how he introduced the idea of transformational grammar. I believe the map we draw in the sand is already in the sand, just like a sculpture is already trapped inside the block of marble.

For artists, their paintings are mental maps of places inside their heads. Personally, these are very real places. Every painting is a mental map, a secret space inside the soul, like a box. We have many such boxes inside, like drawers, containing all sorts of skeletons from our past. We need to open them every now and then to check what they contain. The drawers keep on accumulating new content and that's why artists keep on producing, because the drawers keep on filling up.

The act of painting is like opening a drawer to check what's inside. A sanity check. A self imposed shamanistic repetitive act!

AJ: Giordano Bruno's vision of the chambers in the palace of memory, where a medieval merchant has his entire book-keeping in his memory. Maybe Bill Gates wasn't thinking of Bruno when he named Windows.

GM: Bill Gates and Giordano Bruno would have been the best of friends.

As, we know, cosmological writings were not the only focus of Giordano Bruno before he was burned to death by the Catholic Inquisition in 1600. He wrote extensively on mnemonic techniques and principles in the art of developing memory. I suppose Bill Gates, in this respect, is one of the great innovators in

human history in the field of memory – even if his method relies on an external device for the moment – what counts is that we have instant access to anything we store.

One day humanity will be able to wet-wire these devices and put them inside our bodies to give us a total recall capacity. We will be upping the stakes in the game called *truth*. It will perhaps bring us closer to God by forcing us to take decisions based on greater, if not quasi-total knowledge of facts and implications. Or perhaps not. Perhaps the Divine rests hidden in that fine line called doubt. Certainly that is where great art develops and thrives...

We have a choice in life: to be truthful or not to be truthful – both to ourselves and to others. With a substantially improved palace of memory perhaps we shall be driven to make the right equitable honest choices I hope.

AJ: It's interesting, then, what the spectator will see, since your painting is based on a recollection verging on the Proustian dimension of the remembrance of things past. Willem de Kooning said: painting is a glimpse. Miró had a full retrospective in 1972 at the Musée de l'Art Moderne in Paris. It was an epiphany for him: paintings he hadn't set eyes on for fifty years. Each one triggered his memory of the exact situation where it had been painted, a leak in the roof, neighbors he hadn't thought of for half a century, a favorite café. But the viewer will never know this. Each painting became a battery of memory. Then there is Warhol and his time capsules.

GM: « ... *et tout Combray et ses environs, tout cela qui prend forme et solidité, est sorti, ville et jardins, de ma tasse de thé.* »

Proust's writing on memory provides the perfect example of a time capsule when crumbs of a cake remind him of a whole Universe gone; his mother and her *madeleine* cakes for tea. Paintings are time capsules as well. That may be their primary function. Painting allows me to encapsulate a whole series of places, people, time, events, colors, smells.

By looking at one of my paintings, I can tell you what I was wearing and what I ate that day. I will remember which brushstrokes came first, those I did to complete the work like a full stop in a sentence, whether it was raining, and whether I was craving a *fritella di mele* because I missed my mother's presence, or a pint of stout, because I missed my time in London. But if you asked me what I was doing in November 1991, I'd have to sit down, take pen and paper and think about it for three hours. Worst if you ask me for my phone number.

AJ: So, time capsules... relating to the Lascaux caves. A way of taking inventory, or getting a grip of where you are, and where you have been, of taking control. Drawing, scribbling, a way of getting a grip on time.

GM: Yes.

AJ: *Kritzeltrieb*, this urge to draw, to scribble. The central debate in Modernism was not *to be or not to be*, it was: *to do or not to do* and how much or how little. A modulation, an arbitration between expression and form.

GM: I do believe less is more, because of my reductive bent, to remove rather than add. But this does not mean I would have joined Ezra Pound's chorus in

1934 to shout “make it new” and hence become a paradigm for that whole modernist movement. I cannot reject my past, I cannot reject my roots they are so absolutely deep and anchored. La Fontaine teaches us that the willow will best resist the tempest. That is what great literature and art is all about: being able to bend and swing back into its original position after the storm, thus becoming a reference point for a particular time, place...

But lets go back to the concept of roots. My Ph.D. research at the LSE in the early 1990's examined what I call layers of history. Taking a phenomenological stance to explain the present using the influence of the past meant taking this Modernist debate by the horns. The subject matters studied at the LSE were of no importance really, it's the underlying philosophy that was of interest to me then. That has influenced the character and practice of my art. Syntax excites the inexperienced – the heavyweights should focus on paradigms...

Kritzeltrieb, this urge to draw, to scribble! Fantastic new word you have invented Alan!

I find this fantastic, because this urge you speak about adds to the whole semiotics debate. The sign we leave as artists are a decoding of the meaning embedded in knowledge.

Your concept opens the door wide open to look at how art is created, the actual process, and how this anthropological dimension, so to speak, has an affect and interacts with elements in the field of language and all the subdivisions in the study of the signs that make up a language – from syntactics to pragmatics and semantics.

I would give my left foot to have you, Hippocrates and Ezra Pound over for tea when we can finally all meet in our next resurrection.

AJ: A masterpiece of Jasper Johns entitled *Racing thoughts* comes to mind. Man's stream of thought outracing his manual capacity. Scribbling on a wall, leaving signs of his passing. The complexity of his grammatical systems man invents, even as games... rhymes riddles superstitions taboos...The recreational factor in the complexity of primitive languages rules of grammar. But to go back to this scribble-urge, this graphic impulse. All prisoners become Cy Twombly in a jail cell.

GM: We definitely have to add Cy Twombly in the previous list of guests we should invite over for tea! We could ask him how military communication had an effect on his art – remember he served in the U.S. army as a cryptologist.. regimented codes of communication in a chaotic environment: sums up his great art no ?

The chaotic part of his work gives the illusion that there was a hobby-like element to his graphic impulse. A deeper reading of his canvases reveals an immensely structured and codified set of underlying rules with deep roots in European and Latin literature and myth!

AJ: It is difficult to say if people in ancient times had what we call hobbies. Like the concept of *amateur* as well as the dandy, seems to appear in the seventeenth century, along with the *wunderkammer*, while the concept of the hobby appears around the same time as the invention of childhood, a very British, very Victorian

invention. Duchamp, as a neo-dandy, pretended to approach art as one would a hobby. A dandy must refrain from doing anything at all, otherwise he risks becoming a normal person.

GM: I have a hard time considering being an artist as a hobby. But talking about the invention of childhood, I think every artist is constantly reinventing his own childhood. I passed my own childhood relatively isolated from other children. In Thailand and later in Kenya, I would relate to my outside world, to people and to places, the way an adult would. Through my art I rediscovered parts of my childhood, and myself, but the hobby, if we want to call it like this, is a 24/7 process, an addiction. Art is my addiction. I am on drugs called paint. It's my personal Hotel California.

AJ: After the tragedy of the war, Joseph Beuys became an artist. For him, art seemed to serve as a sort of homeopathy for curing himself. Medicine, shamanism, science: a real Renaissance package.

GM: All artists are in some way shamans because great art is produced during an altered state of consciousness that is at the core of any shamanistic act and process. The artist has to transcend his physical state anchored in the present to reach a visual ecstasy. It is a powerful way of curing the soul. I believe the body and soul are inextricably linked and bound by a form of Holy Spirit – a trilogy wrapped into one.

Salvation lies in art. It's my motto. One of my pet projects is to build a hospital for children one day. I will house a great art collection and have spaces for children to actually get involved in art whilst they stay in hospital. Art saved me from oblivion.

AJ: Alberto Burri entered the war as a medical doctor and came out as an artist. A complete mystery.

GM: No mystery to me. Alberto Burri never left war in his head. He was punching holes and stitching many of his canvases long after the war had ended. I suspect he was still shooting and sewing up wounds in his artist studio.

AJ: Did you have any connection to Pop Culture?

GM: Zero.

AJ: Not even Patti Pravo?

GM: My pop culture was Lorenzo de Medici.

AJ: Montaigne is said to have been brought up by specially chosen servants who were instructed to only speak Latin to him.

GM: My son Orso Augusto loved this kind of rigor at home. We shared an hour of classical music every morning before I took him to school. In the afternoon, an hour of lecture, among which Montaigne, Verlaine... I believe the greatest mental flexibility is possible if the roots are solidly anchored in something. It does not matter what that something is, as long as there is a tremendous structure and

logic to it. The aim of parents should be to educate children into rational adults with a total freedom and flexibility of thought because of a strong anchorage, both historical and contemporary.

AJ: Do you think that the Tiepolo had his own simultaneity with ancient gods, Christianity and his own contemporaneity?

GM: Yes I do. Giambattista Tiepolo was a great innovator in the field of art. In fact, he was way ahead of his time. His works Centuries later are a definition of that time and culture.

I sleep under a crumbling frescoed ceiling at home in Venice. They were painted by Francesco Fontebasso who died in 1769, but the *lunettes* above my bed are, I believe, by the hand of Tiepolo. He was working next door at the same time, so he was called in to add his touch. I wake up looking at his allegorical figures and famous dogs every morning when I am in Venice. His lapis lazuli clear blue color, painted on a pink and orange undercoat, puts me in a good mood. He is still contemporary today.

AJ: The mercantile and economical factors underlying the Baroque are of great interest, but also the intimate link to ideological conflict between Protestantism and the Church.

GM: The ideological conflict between Protestantism and the Church in Rome lies in their different interpretation of the Holy Scriptures, as well as the differences in their origin, and ecclesiastical structure.

Despite the same core doctrine, it all boils down to the degree of interpretation of the written word, greater in the Catholic Church, not really allowed in the Protestant church. Which one leads to greater freedom in art? The answer is clear to me.

AJ: What would it mean to be called a man of your time?

GM: It would be a great compliment. Painters should provide a personal chronicle of their time, if it is dull. If they are able to leave works that define a time and a place then they are assured a place in history.

AJ: There seems to be some sense of protest.

GM: I paint and sculpt how I perceive my world. But I don't feel the need to participate. I only watch. I don't really like my time.

AJ: For that matter, I'm not all that crazy about it myself.

GM: I try to escape this temporal prison we are in. I often think of Africa where I grew up, it's a timeless place. The earthiness of Africa in my childhood, the use of the hands, something of this gets into how I sculpt. The clay, is very physical. I rarely use color in my sculptures.

AJ: Interesting, because color is the humidity of your painting. John Chamberlain is the first modern artist to do polychrome sculpture.

GM: I use variations of a same language to describe and play with place and

space: two different things. One is earthy [sculpture] while the other is cerebral [painting].

AJ: Is anything you brought away with you from Mammon of use to you now on Parnassus?

GM: Both the Talmud and the New Testament use the word *mammon* to mean material possession. Well you know Alan « *Aucun homme ne peut servir deux maîtres : car toujours il haïra l'un et aimera l'autre. On ne peut servir à la fois Dieu et Mammon.* (Matthieu 6:24). » Parnassus, on the other hand, so dear to Apollo son of Zeus and Leto, is associated with knowledge, the arts, literature, music...

... and here lies the problem; the two are so different yet inextricably linked: Parnassus has been forced to open its doors to the concept of mammon. This is so clear if we look at the forces underpinning the contemporary art market..

AJ: Is there something missing?

GM: Yes. People with whom I can talk with about art on Parnassus. Life in the studio for an artist day to day can be something of a void. A marvelous void, but a void none the less. I paint, first and foremost, for myself. I have to breathe in the same way I need to paint.

In fact I wouldn't mind living in a monastery, and just be able to paint undisturbed where I know I will have soup, bread and a cup of wine, a walk in the garden, and then maybe a bit of conversation in the evening.

AJ: Sounds like what Balthus did.

GM: Exactly. But we should also thank his lovely wife for having created and protected the home environment that enabled Balthus to work in peace and serenely.

Venice

Conversation Piece

Part Two

January 2014

AJ: What do you think of the working title *The Creative Quest* for my monograph on your work?

GM: Your choice of title surprises me Alan. The very first thing that I attempted to write as a young boy of fifteen was a small book called *The Search in vain*. It was in Athens where I lived in the mid 1980's. I got to about thirty dense pages then someone stole the manuscript at school.

AJ: What was the storyline?

GM: It was about the issue of *Self*. It related to my dream of throwing over and starting again as a painter. The book revolved around the will to disappear from society whilst interacting with it from a cavern built under a river.

AJ: Where do you think the cave was?

GM: It was under a river that flowed through a vibrant city with a strong artistic fervor, could have been New York. Somewhere above ground, in a bar, De Kooning was drinking a cold beer waiting to meet me at around 4:30pm...

AJ: Very Jules Verne.

GM: For some reason this brings me back to ants. In Kenya, I had practically nothing to do all day, so ants were a major focus of my interest.

Termites were a passion. We would dig for hours trying to find the termite queen which looks like a large white translucent almost opaline colored large human thumb with a microscopic head. Unable to move, surrounded by males, usually two or three meters underground, they are the heart of the nest. The expert gardener knew where to dig. The locals eat them. I refrained from eating queens but loved the soldiers, especially fried after the rains when they develop wings and come out at night in search of bright lights. Our gardener taught me how to eat them. They taste of fried chicken, crunchy with a peanut twist, long on the tongue.

I think Jules Verne would have enjoyed digging with me in the garden and sharing a dish of fried ants.

AJ: Your encounters, although they occurred when you were still a child, with Thailand and Kenya have something of E. M. Forster's *Passage to India* or

Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*: the encounter with the *other*.

GM: I try to assimilate the different cultures that have touched my everyday life: Asia, Africa, Europe. It's not easy. An Italian collector of my work called Gianfranco Tolio in Bassano del Grappa asked me one day whilst having lunch at their home, Villa Giusti, *Do you feel a bit Italian?* I answered yes but thought of Nietzsche, of Zarathustra walking his tightrope above the abyss. I am constantly trying to bridge the many facets that make up Gaspare Manos the person, the artist, the father, the friend. The only way I know is through a line of color; the line that separates my spiritual being from my earthly body sac.

You mention the encounter with the other. Writings by Le Clezio, Thomas Mann, Mircea Eliade come to mind. The more you travel the more you seek and the more you question your own principles. In my personal case, it's been more of a Passage to Asia and Passage to Africa that have marked me most.

Like Hegel, Sartre writes about becoming cognizant of our own self-existence only after accepting and seeing how others perceive you. The series of passages through various continents forced me to examine myself deeply in order to justify what I am trying to express as an artist.

The principles of Western culture and identity have been, up to recently at least, constructed on two perceived opposing forces: civilized versus barbarian. Conrad's work is a good example. His book *Heart of Darkness* raises questions about imperialism and racism. Central to this work is the idea that there is little difference between so-called civilized world and those described as savages. In art, there is less of a boundary. Often savage art will be superior to more refined art. Truth often does not come fully polished and nicely packaged!

AJ: Dalmatia?

GM: Dalmatia is for me a sweet burden. Dalmatia still exists in the hearts and minds of more than half a million people. These families escaped when Italy lost Dalmatia to Yugoslavia after WW2. The language was banned. The name Dalmatia was erased from maps only to reappear recently.

AJ: Like Gaelic in Ireland under the British and Catalan under Franco. I recall the sad tale of the last speaker of Dalmatian, who could only sit at the seaside café and smile to himself at the old jokes.

GM: We are a dislocated family. Dalmatians are people of the sea, real travelers, so I definitely have that in my genes. My grandmother was born in Egypt, my father in Dalmatia and my mother in Venice, myself in Bangkok, my daughters Sofia and Giulia in London, my son Orso Augusto in Paris. We travelled for generations. Our ancestors had tall ships. One of them was an entrepreneur with a real taste for travel. A friend of the famous explorer de Agostini, they embarked on a schooner around 1870 to explore the coast of Argentina. A museum in Ushuaia was opened in his house and bears his name: Beban. We are luxury Gypsies, I suppose. We travel far but never forget our ancestors, roots and culture.

AJ: Do you miss the thrill of business?

GM: No. I am an artist. The artist's thrill is to paint. What I miss is the adrenaline of being connected to information, of knowing one can get an instant answer from people one interacts with. Art on the other hand is slow. It takes years, in fact a lifetime or more... Think of Monet's Nymphs... Real art like this is very far removed from the business it enables and feeds.

AJ: What of Kokoschka?

GM: Kokoshka?

Oscar died in Montreux in 1980 just a few years before we settled in Switzerland! He was not formally trained, like myself, as he joined the Kunstgewerbeschule. Unlike the Academy of Fine Art in Vienna, Kunstgewerbeschule focused on architecture, furniture, crafts and modern design giving Kokoschka a freedom to develop his own expressionistic style within that Vienna School of thinking.

Personally, I was saved by not attending a so called formal art class.

AJ: Max Beckmann?

GM: I like his work. You can feel how the insanity of war and human behavior modified his formal training approach to art, his perception of space. He was a true artist, a real thinker and very well read at that. His obsession with self-portraits [like Picasso, and Rembrandt] is well known and throws us a clue about his search for the self. I feel for him in this respect. In a similar way I take hundreds of photos of my face and have painted a great number of self-portraits. Not because of some passion for my ageing looks, but more for a constant surprise and discovery of how this face of mine reflects more and more what I have lived and what I feel inside. It's like a glove turned inside out, with some of the lining rather thin from use. I like to see how it is evolving.

AJ: Ensor?

This Belgian artist really had to fight for it. The cynicism is so clear on the faces of the people and clowns he painted.

Laurence Madeline curated a great exhibition of James Ensor at the d'Orsay Museum in Paris in 2010. I rediscovered this artist and read his autobiography that is so full of disgust for society and its by-product; modern architects. It made me smile.

AJ: Miguel Barcelo' ?

GM: Interestingly, I often talk about Barcelo' when visiting my friends Marussa Gravagnuolo and Christine Lahoud at the Pièce Unique Gallery in Paris. Barcelo' is a good artist despite his arrogance. I like the work of Barcelo', his connection to Africa, in his case, Mali. I appreciate his ceramics. It's a good Catalan artist whose work one should collect. I discovered him through conversations with Rosa Maria Malet, director of the Joan Miro' Foundation in Barcelona.

AJ: With studios in two cities, how does Venice effect the paintings in Paris?

GM: It's a sort of artistic bigamy! With studios in separate cities I could dedicate

myself to two intimate art harems, each harem containing canvases to be worked upon at leisure..!

But I feel the time has come to fold back into a single place.

I want to centralize my work, my life my energy into a single space, a single routine, a single silent rhythm away from the madding crowd.

I now need to cut all that is superfluous in my life and just paint.

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ALAN JONES:

Alan Jones, writer and art critic, has lived and worked in many countries, including Italy, Japan and the USA. He was a close friend to many of the great names on the art scene in New York in the 1970's and 1980's, for example Jeff Koons and Leo Castelli, to whom he has consecrated a monograph in 2007: "Leo Castelli: L'italiano che inventò l'arte in America" (Castelvecchi Editore). He has been involved as an organizer in numerous exhibitions in international galleries and museums, including the Fondation Cartier in Paris, the Guggenheim Museum in New York, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, the List Center du Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Harvard, the PS1 of MoMA in New York, the New Museum, the Studio Museum Harlem and the Museum for African Art...

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